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Book Review

Tanika Sarkar, *Religion & Women in India : Gender, Faith, and Politics, 1780s–1980s;* SUNY Press, 2024

Reviewed by Rahul Ranjan*

Tanika Sarkar's Religion and Women in India: Gender, Faith, and Politics, 1780s–1980s is a deeply insightful exploration of the intersections between gender, religion, and politics in South Asia. Covering a period of two centuries, the book presents a thorough historical narrative while maintaining a focus on women's lived experiences. Sarkar's scholarly rigor and ability to weave complex themes together make this work an invaluable resource. While the book could have delved deeper into some regions and themes, it remains a remarkable contribution to understanding the dynamics of gender and religion in South Asia.

In the first chapter, Women's Histories, Gender Studies: An Overview, Sarkar provides an excellent introduction to how the study of women's histories evolved in India. She highlights the importance of moving beyond Eurocentric feminist frameworks and emphasizes the role of caste, class, and region in shaping women's lives (p. 3). Her acknowledgment of intersectionality is particularly commendable as it brings attention to the varied experiences of Indian women. For instance, she notes how African-American women slaves shared more in common with their male counterparts than with white women (p. 3), illustrating the limitations of universal feminist paradigms. While her critique of early historiography is insightful, a deeper exploration of post-colonial feminist contributions, like those of Edward Said and Ashis Nandy (p. 7), could have enriched the discussion.

Chapter 2, Redesigning Gender Laws, shines in its analysis of colonial lawmaking and its impact on personal laws. Sarkar's exploration of how laws like the abolition of sati in 1829 were shaped by debates between reformers and orthodox forces is especially engaging (p. 45). Her nuanced explanation of the collaboration between British officials and Brahmanical scholars shows how colonial governance reinforced existing caste and gender hierarchies. The chapter's strength lies in its ability to navigate the complexities of legal pluralism, such as the coexistence of scriptural laws and regional customs. For example, she examines how tribal women in Chotanagpur were affected by shifting property

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laws, which challenged traditional practices (p. 34). This analysis highlights the diversity of experiences across communities.

In Chapter 3, Redesigning Gender: Reformers and the Orthodoxy, Sarkar delves into the efforts of social reformers like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, who campaigned for widow remarriage (p. 53). Her detailed account of how Vidyasagar used scriptural reinterpretations to push for legal changes demonstrates the complexity of reform movements. Sarkar also brings attention to marginalized voices, such as Dalit reformers like Jotirao Phule, who linked caste and gender oppression (p. 105). While this chapter predominantly focuses on upper-caste Hindu reformers, the inclusion of Dalit and Muslim perspectives adds richness to the narrative.

Chapter 4, Gendering Work, is particularly strong in analysing how colonial rule transformed women's labour roles. Sarkar's discussion of women entering factory work, especially in the textile industry, is both detailed and engaging (p. 135). She highlights the challenges women faced, such as poor working conditions and gender-based wage disparities, while also recognizing their agency in navigating these new spaces. One of the chapter's strengths is its focus on how colonial labour reforms impacted women's lives, though the analysis remains primarily urban-focused. For instance, while she briefly mentions rural tribal women's contributions (p. 132), a more in-depth examination of their experiences could have added depth.

Chapter 5, Gendering Politics, is one of the book's most engaging sections, as it captures the varied roles women played in nationalist movements. Sarkar's portrayal of figures like the Rani of Jhansi and grassroots activists during the Quit India Movement is both inspiring and informative (p. 153, p. 161). She skilfully highlights how women's participation in political movements challenged traditional gender roles while also navigating societal expectations. The inclusion of women revolutionaries, such as those involved in armed struggles, adds a compelling dimension to the chapter.

In Chapter 6, Holy and Unholy Gender, Sarkar provides a fascinating analysis of courtesans, concubines, and sex workers as cultural and political agents. Her exploration of Lucknow's *tawaifs*, who were celebrated for their artistic achievements but later marginalized by colonial morality, is particularly striking (p. 205). Sarkar's nuanced approach brings out the contradictions in how these women were both empowered and oppressed within their social contexts. Her discussion of non-heteronormative identities, though insightful, could have been expanded further. For instance, she briefly mentions queer relationships in Mughal literature (p. 211), but this topic deserves more attention to fully capture the diversity of gender experiences.

Chapter 7, Writing and Performing Gender, stands out for its exploration of how literature, theatre, and print culture shaped and reflected gender norms. Sarkar's analysis of the rise of women's journals in the 19th century (p. 234) is particularly noteworthy, as it highlights how women used these platforms to engage with modernity and challenge traditional roles. Her focus on Bengali literature is detailed and insightful, though the

inclusion of works from other linguistic traditions, such as Tamil or Marathi, would have broadened the chapter's scope (p. 221).

In Chapter 8, Post-Colonial India, Sarkar critically examines the continuity of gender struggles in independent India. Her discussion of feminist movements, such as the Chipko Movement, effectively illustrates how women played a key role in addressing environmental and social issues (p. 283). She also highlights the limitations of post-Independence legal reforms, particularly in addressing rural women's struggles. For example, while she discusses women's labour rights (p. 250), a more detailed analysis of land rights and environmental activism by rural women could have strengthened the chapter.

The final chapter, The 'Others,' Pakistan, and Bangladesh, extends the analysis to neighbouring countries, offering a comparative perspective on gender and religion in South Asia. Sarkar's discussion of women's activism during Pakistan's Hudood Ordinance (p. 324) and Bangladesh's Liberation War (p. 335) is insightful and highlights shared colonial legacies. However, the chapter feels somewhat rushed, as it does not fully explore the cultural and political differences between these countries and India. For example, her analysis of women's roles in Bangladesh's labour movements (p. 337) could have been expanded to provide a deeper understanding of class and gender dynamics.

Overall, Religion and Women in India is a meticulously researched and thought-provoking book that sheds light on the complex relationship between gender, religion, and politics in South Asia. Sarkar's ability to balance historical depth with critical analysis is commendable, and her focus on ordinary women's experiences adds a refreshing dimension to the narrative. While the book leans heavily on Bengal-centric examples and could explore subaltern and queer perspectives more deeply, its strengths far outweigh these limitations. Sarkar's work is an essential contribution to the study of gender and religion in South Asia, offering valuable insights for scholars and general readers alike.

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